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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that doublespeak statements are often criticized not because they are dishonest, but because as individuals we do not personally agree with the underlying philosophy of the statements. Several sets of words and phrases are discussed and their meanings, as perceived by various types of people, are examined. To fit deceptive language, we must (1) be aware of our own primary assumptions, (2) begin to teach students to be more aware of deceptive speaking and writing, (3) teach students to listen and read with precision, (4) teach students how to read abstractions and universals, and (5) provide guidelines for students' philosophical and moral development. (TS)

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Continuing Forum II 3:30 pm, November 29, 1974

Title: Doublespeak: Another View

The word doublespeak caused a mild furor in the secretaries' office. No one could find it in the dictionary. When I entered to get my mail, they pounced on me: "What is doublespeak?" I explained it, and then I went to find out more about it.

I found (Counciletter, College English, April, 1974) that doublespeak is "dishonest and inhumane" language. I was thrilled; there is no more inhumane language than what we ourselves often use in the articles we write. You mean from now on the articles I read "to keep up in my field" will be clear and readable? No such luck!

We are apparently going to write articles just as turgid as usual. We are opposed to only one aspect of inhumane language: deceptive language. Well, of course, I go along with that, but I do have "another view" as my title suggests. At the same time I hope that my presentation of my other view on doublespeak will be humane as well as honest.

I want to start by discussing briefly a type of doublespeak which is not truly deceptive. It needs recognition in a talk like this, but I will handle it briefly because I don't have a sharply different view of it.

This language only looks deceptive; it really isn't. I refer to statements like these: "hospital tested," "Quasar television," and "100% increase in profits." These statements are not really deceptive because any one who knows how to read or listen knows that these statements say nothing. The alert reader or listener automatically asks: "Hospital tested for what?" And "What

CS 201 919

were the results of the test?" The television set may be a good one but adding the word Quasar tells nothing at all about the TV set. And profits may have increased 100%, but a vital fact was omitted: 100% of what? Profits could conceivably be totally inadequate.

There is another type of statement like this, but a little more complex. "Five out of six dentists queried recommend our gum for their patients who chew gum." To those who know how to read or listen, this statement says nothing. It may be saying faintly that five out of six dentists don't recommend gum at all.

I think this is enough of this type of doublespeak for now. I want to move on to another type, the type which fulfills my title: "Another View." Actually what I want to talk about is the way we attack doublespeak. This is what we seem to do: we call a statement doublespeak not so much because it is really dishonest, but because it assumes something we don't agree with. If we agree with the underlying philosophy, we call the statement honest. I will give an example of my own, one I've never heard from an English teacher. Take this statement: Income tax is a means of distributing the wealth. If you are a liberal, this is an honest statement. If you are not a liberal, it is doublespeak. Many who are not liberals would consider this statement more honest: Income tax is a penalty inflicted on the hard-working and the frugal. Which statement we decide is doublespeak depends on our own personal philosophy. And no matter which one we choose as the honest statement we are manipulating our readers and using a kind of doublespeak ourselves.

We must, in handling doublespeak, get out of the habit of assuming that our philosophy is the only legitimate philosophy. Our ways of thinking are not inevitable ways of thinking; and impossible as it may seem, there are honest

people who conscientiously disagree with us. This is not dishonesty when their language expresses their disagreement.

Another example, educators say: The student has a motivational problem. To the professional educator this is an honest statement. Many other people think of it as doublespeak; they hold it is more honest to say: The student doesn't want an education. Our unwillingness to be honest about this may aggravate many of our problems.

I take another example from the Counciletter, College English, April, 1974. We should not say disadvantaged; it is doublespeak and dishonest. It is more honest to say black, poor, ignorant. Again, which of these is doublespeak depends on the speaker's philosophy. For those speakers interested only in minorities, black, poor, ignorant are honest words; disadvantaged is deceptive. However, for those interested in all human suffering and pain, disadvantaged is not doublespeak, it is more honest. I agree with those who may point out that the word disadvantaged is less vivid, but for the trained listener or reader the word disadvantaged is more complete, less exclusive; disadvantaged includes poor, black, ignorant; but because it is actually more honest, it also includes the searing pain of the alcoholic or the depressed; it includes the rich who can be helpless and trapped in human situations. On the other hand the poor can be happy: when some of our students went to Appalachia to help the poor, they found them happy. In this day and age, I hesitate to call happy people disadvantaged in any sense, even when they are poor. I submit that the word disadvantaged is not real doublespeak, unless we raise a sort of class consciousness to an orthodoxy and consider the poor, the ignorant, the black the only people worthy of attention.

Another example from the same source: air support is doublespeak and dishonest. Bombing, on the other hand, is honest. Again, what is doublespeak here depends on our opinions, our opinions on war in general and on the particular war referred to. If we hold that there is no such thing as a just war, if we are sure that the war referred to (presumably the Vietnam War) is undoubtedly unjust, if we hold that pain is all there is to war, if we hold that bombing is never justified, then maybe bombing is a better word than air support. But do we have the right to insinuate our opinions by condemning the expression air support in favor of our favorite word bombing? Even so, just as in the previous example, the skilled reader finds air support more complete, more honest (though less vivid): air support includes bombing, strafing, and the purpose of all this--to support the goal of the strategy. Air support can be considered the better word; it is not doublespeak.

I am not defending Watergate, but even the so-called Watergate language can come into this same discussion. Inappropriate instead of against the law; entry instead of burglary; intelligence gathering instead of bugging. I have no intention of taking a stand here, but can we at least realize that there are people who conscientiously disagree with us, people who feel that what we call doublespeak here is really legitimate language? Breaking the law for a "good" reason is not a bad thing to some people; bugging may be a way of life for some who defend us from our adversaries; therefore intelligence gathering seems a very appropriate term to them. In many TV shows the act is not burglary; it is entering as long as the "good guy" does it for a good reason. And around 1970 we educators had a lot of very nice words for very serious crimes, but the crimes were committed by minorities whom we love and

ought to love. But what do we call these same things committed by the government or by non-minorities? Do you wonder I speak of a class consciousness in this doublespeak business?

Finally, I want to refer to our own use of doublespeak. I refer to a remark in the CCCC statement on Students' Rights to Their Own Dialect. The remark refers to standard English as the "prestigious variety of English." I insist that this is doublespeak. It is doublespeak, first, because it does not say outright that standard English is the language of prestige; the reader is allowed to infer that this is so. The general avoidance of the word standard English is itself a kind of doublespeak. It is doublespeak, second, because the connotations of the word prestigious in this context are a deceptive attack on the whole concept of standard English. It is like saying that the Cadillac is the car of the gangster. It may be that the Cadillac is used by gangsters; it may be that standard English is used by prestigious people, but that is not what makes it standard English. Standard English is not the language of the prestigious; it is the language of those who are in the mainstream; it is the language of those who want to function in the mainstream. I am glad I know standard English; I have the Cadillac, but I am not a gangster. I have standard English, but I am neither prestigious, nor powerful, nor rich. But I can write and speak effectively and easily to a wide variety of people who use English. I have a foreign student who learned standard English—we communicate with ease. If she spoke only her dialect, we could not communicate. If I knew only my French-Canadian dialect, she could understand me even less, and you would be under a strain listening to me now. But with standard English, I am not limited to the French-Canadian ghetto; I can address people who are not students of language; I can address people who are not English

teachers--I have the checks from editors to prove it. Standard English may be a myth to some scholars; it may be the language of prestige to others, but it is the language of unrestricted communication to the professional writer. To refer to standard English as the "prestigious variety of language" is, in my opinion, dishonest; it is doublespeak.

Of course I am not defending deceptive language; I want to oppose it effectively, and letting our own philosophies distort or blind our judgment is not an effective way to expose deceptive speech.

I suggest that we fight deception in speech several ways.

First, we must be aware of our own assumptions, assumptions which may blind us to the presumed honesty of other views of the particular problem at hand. We must really act out the realization that our ways of thinking are not the inevitable ways of thinking. In the light of history our present ways of thinking may prove to be merely the fashion of our time, ephemeral and evanescent. We may even live to see the day when we may wish that the Watergate cover-up was successful. How's that for heresy?

Second, we must begin to teach our students to become more aware of deceptive speaking and writing. We must insist that they write and speak with care and precision--more communication and less self-expression. If they become careful of precision and honesty in their own writing and speaking, they will be more watchful for it in others.

In addition we must teach students to listen and read with precision. We must get away from that perennial nonsense: a communication means whatever you get out of it. A COMMUNICATION MEANS WHAT IT SAYS. I have the impression that we no longer look at words, as Ruskin recommends; we skim rapidly and

get vague impressions: "hospital tested"--it must be good; "99 44/100% pure"--ah, it's pure. We've got to get clear to our students that words carry something or ought to carry something. If they look THROUGH the word to the underlying reality, they will never be deceived.

We must teach our students how to read abstractions and universals. The trained reader or listener flashes instantly on the screen of his imagination a wide sampling of concrete examples and illustrations whenever he contacts abstractions and universal terms. And he does not let the writer tell him which examples to look at; he looks at all which are legitimately included in the words used by the writer or speaker.

Finally the whole problem of deceptive writing really is an ethical problem. Writers and speakers must be made really aware of some kind of solid moral outlook. From what I have seen most people have a childish and naive concept of the moral guidelines which should guide their activity. Morality is a long and complex study; we've got to get away from such nonsense as do your own thing. Ordinary people realize, even if we do not, that principles like do your own thing can be used to justify anything. And then there is the very attractive, but equally destructive, principle: a lie is all right if it hurts no one. Principles like this can be used to justify the Watergate cover-up. If that principle is valid, then I would try to achieve the Watergate cover-up myself, if I thought I could get away with it. We may yet find that the Watergate revelation has hurt more of the nation than a successful cover-up would have done.

Watergate and doublespeak are small parts of a huge panorama of the moral

bankruptcy of our times. And to prevent such things in the future, the whole nation must start acting in every respect with more integrity, more realism, less permissiveness; we must make real demands on ourselves and on our students.